

*What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

*Philippians 3:8-11*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### A PASSION FOR HIS PRESENCE

*Wanting much more of Jesus*

Knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection – that's what I want my worship, my life to be about – to know his presence at all times, to hear his words and his thoughts, to experience his ever-present hand on my life, work and relationships. I want to know that God is real in my life. I want to feel him.

Knowing God, actually feeling like God is in the room with us, is a rare and unsustainable moment. But when we feel it, when we KNOW God is there, it is a moment we rarely forget.

Experiencing the reality of God is as different as the number of people who have sought it!

## WORSHIP WALK

For some the presence of Jesus is a feeling that envelopes like a thick fog yet with a tangible heaviness or substance to it. It is associated with intensity, intimacy and vulnerability in a time of focused worship.

For others, it is a destination you arrive at. "We were led into his presence." "I could hardly wait to be ushered into his presence." "As I walked into the room I felt the weight of his presence descend upon me." "I sensed his presence envelope me the moment I knelt in worship."

Some say they have arrived or experienced his presence when, in the quiet reverence of silence or meditation, they know the awe of "God in this place."

Others don't arrive without an ample amount of vibrant, celebrative worship that lifts their feet to dancing and their voice with shouts of praise to an awesome God.

Still others describe the presence of Jesus being revealed to them as they feed the poor, clothe the naked, meet the needs of their neighbours who have experienced loss or grief, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. For them the presence of Jesus is in the eyes of those to whom they minister.

Some say they know that Jesus is present because the Scriptures tell them so. To them, experiencing his presence is a simple act of faith in the doctrine of Emmanuel – God with us. They believe that God will never leave nor forsake them and that nothing can separate them from his love. So for them knowing the presence of God is more the activation of their faith than it is the activation of their senses.

God comes to each of us in his own unique and wonderful way. He often seems to respond to us in a way that matches who he has made us to be. To limit the description of God's presence in only one or two ways is to limit a limitless God.

If I am honest with myself, I recognize that God has demonstrated his presence to me in each of these ways at different times. If I were not listening with open ears, watching with open eyes, worshipping with an open heart – I would miss knowing God's presence many times.

I believe that God is constantly shouting out his presence to his people, but we sometimes have not tuned our senses to notice the variety of ways he lets us know that he *is* here. Or we have so narrowed our expectations of how God reveals his presence to us that we usually miss perceiving it.

In the winter of 2002, I spent three months in Guatemala attempting to learn Spanish. The first family I lived with were devout Catholics. Even though initially I could barely understand their words, I knew and saw that this family loved God. In many ways, I saw the presence of Jesus in their love and care for me – a foreigner in their home.

The season of Lent and Easter week – *Semana Santa* or *Holy Week* – is a huge event in Guatemala. Long and complicated processions wind their way through the city streets each Sunday of Lent and many times during Holy Week itself. People spend hours making amazing carpets on the streets of coloured sawdust and flowers for the procession to walk over. This is an act of giving, of making a way for the King of kings just like the people in Jerusalem did when they laid palm branches and coats on the road for Jesus to ride over on the donkey.

Others pay for the honour of carrying the large floats that depict the suffering of Christ. Women make a point of wearing high heels and warm clothes to intensify the suffering they experience. Some do it as penance for their sin. Some politicians carry the float as a way to demonstrate their humility to their constituency. Of course, like all our worship, it's not all pure. Some do it so the people in the community can see them. Others have to do it because it's necessary for their position in the community. Others simply do it because it's expected.

## WORSHIP WALK

But whatever the rationale and despite whether I agreed theologically with the reasons behind the activity, I experienced the presence of Christ as I helped a Guatemalan family create a carpet of sawdust and roses and watched later on as people, some with tears in their eyes, carried a float depicting the crucified Christ over that same carpet – demolishing it in their path. I actually felt the weight of the words, “It was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down” (Isaiah 53:4a – NLT). There was a visibility of the presence of Jesus in the acts of his people playing out his suffering in these processions.

*If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth? (Exodus 33:15-17)*

This passage in Exodus comes right after the fiasco with the golden calf. God had called Moses to the mountain for personal instruction. This meant that he had to leave the people while he ascended the mountain to speak with God. When he returned the people were worshipping a golden calf. In just a few short weeks they deserted God for an inanimate object.

God was furious!

Moses begged God to forgive the people. He had the people destroy the calf. God relented and did not destroy the Israelites, but he put a distance between them. He told Moses that he would save their lives and allow them to go on into the promised land, but he would not go with them. He even relented to the point that he agreed to give the Israelites a personal angel that would walk ahead of them to protect them and give them victory over their enemies, but God himself would stay behind. He told Moses that he was still angry with the people and that if he went with them, he might just change his mind again and destroy them on the way (Exodus 33:1-3).

But Moses refuses to go without God. No angel – no matter how powerful and capable of destroying Israel's enemies – was an adequate replacement for the presence of God himself. So he again bargains with God.

He tells God that there is no point in going ahead into the promised land if God is not with them, for without God there is nothing to set them apart from any other nation. They were God's people. Moses hung on to that distinction. The presence of God gives evidence of his leadership, his love and his life in and with his people. Moses passionately desired the presence of God in his life and in the lives of the people he led. He believed that the Israelites were nothing without God's presence.

As Christians, we are also the people of God. Our one and only distinction from all the other people on the face of the earth is the presence of God in us. God's presence is the mark on our lives that demonstrates to others that we belong to the King. We are not citizens of this world. We are strangers and aliens. We are not identified as Christ's children by the things we do – although we often get this confused. Going to church, speaking clean and pure language, not smoking, drinking moderately, carrying our Bible with us – whatever we grew up believing proved that we are Christians – are not valid indicators of our status with Christ. The only true mark of being a Christian is God's presence in our lives. We are a mirror that reflects the presence and character of God in everything that we do.

When we desire the presence of Christ in our life, we long for Jesus to be immediately apparent in everything we do. We do not naturally reflect God's character. Jesus tells us to love people – including those people who we naturally feel uncomfortable with. That means we love people exactly where they are. This is a huge challenge for me. It's so much easier for me to love the people who are a lot like me. I like to be with people who are comfortable with the same things I like. But that's not what God tells me. He tells me that I am to love the people whom he loves – with all the bizarre gaps they have in their lives.

## WORSHIP WALK

Reflecting Jesus means that we will walk with people so they can leave their sin. We will be patient with those who sin again and again, always giving them the opportunity to come back to God. Again, this is one of the most difficult things for me to do. How can God consistently take us back when we continually walk away? But remember the story of the Israelites. Time and time again God performed miracles. As the Egyptians chased them towards the Red Sea, God opened up the water so the Israelites could walk through. Then he slammed the walls of water onto the Egyptians pursuing them, drowning most of their army. Just a few days later, as the people wandered in the wilderness, they complained to God because they were thirsty. Even though God had just done an amazing miracle, they didn't go to God nor did they trust that God would give them the water they needed. Rather they complained and whined, saying that God was not real even though God continued to be with them in the pillar of cloud and fire.

Reflecting Jesus means that we will stand up for the weak and the powerless. Jesus characterizes mercy and justice. The world reflects power and position. When we reflect Jesus in our daily lives, we protect those who cannot protect themselves. The Bible tells us that true religion is to visit those in prison and to care for the widows and the orphans. The world says that the strong succeed. God says the strong should always reach out to help the weak. The world says that if we hang around with the weak we will not get the best position. God says that position is meaningless if we lose our soul.

Reflecting Jesus means that we will confront sin and evil in us and our world. We will do it in a way that redeems the world, not simply judges and rejects. God is holy. He cannot bear sin. How much easier to simply close our eyes to sin and hope it goes away! The world in which we live is filled with activities that hurt God. That does not mean that we simply judge people. God points out people's sin in love. As God comes alongside of us and loves us, we begin to hate our sin and the closer we move to God's side, the more painful our own sin becomes.

A passion for the presence of Christ in our everyday lives enables us to understand his love for the world. When we begin to understand how much he loves the sinner we will begin to experience his presence as we worship, as we meditate, as we reach out and as we love our neighbours. And when we love and meet the needs of people we come in contact with everyday, we will begin to know his presence more in every act, every thought, every prayer, every song.

I love it when I feel the presence of God in a strong emotional way. Sometimes, especially after a lengthy time without that feeling, I find myself longing for it deeply. But I am coming to more fully understand that's not the only way he reveals himself or wants to reveal himself to me. He invites me to see him and perceive him in many different places, experiences and circumstances. He encourages me to see him in all that I do. He is eager for me to know him in all ways and not to limit the expression of his presence to me and in me.

If God's presence is to be the indication mark of God in my life to others, then I had better be doing more than seeking his presence in the midst of the gathered community of believers. I need to become desperate for God to reveal his presence to me in every circumstance, everyday. I need to reflect God's character at work, in the grocery store, on the hockey rink, in situations of conflict.

Here are a few things I've done to develop a passion for his presence:

1. Ask God to reveal himself to you each day.

Sounds simple enough, right? And it is. But life has a way of simply happening. I forget to ask. I meander through the day hopefully being surprised by the presence of God rather than looking for him.

## WORSHIP WALK

2. Ask yourself, "Where do I see God's activity, his handiwork, in the ordinary?"

I try and do this frequently throughout my week. But I have to be conscious of looking for God. I also have to know God more and more so that I am able to recognize him.

3. Try to keep track of when you haven't known his presence in your life and ask what circumstances might have blinded you from seeing him.

Some weeks are nuts. I seem to be moving from one thing to the next without stopping. I get so caught up in my daily life that I don't see God at all. I shouldn't be surprised at all – because I have missed looking out for him. When I recognize what has happened I begin to look for ways to create space for God to make his presence known to me again; silence for meditation; quiet reflection on his Scriptures; a walk in the park with an eye and ear open for what he wants to show me; becoming aware of the conversations that I have with others and how God may be wanting to communicate something of his presence within them.

4. Try to broaden your perspective of what his presence is or looks like by asking people in different life stages, from different denominations and different experiences to tell you about how they have witnessed God's presence in their daily lives. This is a little risky.

I meet many people in my travels. They have amazing stories to tell about how God has met them. But too often I meet people who close their minds and hearts to different ways of God acting in their lives. The charismatics see less charismatic people as unemotional and untouched by God. Sometimes they even believe

that others have not even met God because they don't explain their relationship in the same ways or words. The less charismatic Christians are skeptical of the faith and lives of those who are charismatic, often suspicious that they have accepted untruths and are living purely on emotionalism. To some he speaks with a whisper or thought. To others, he speaks with imagery and colour. And to others he speaks through people.

Remember that God speaks to people in many, many different ways. Be open to listening to others and letting their relationship with God touch your life.

5. Pray that God would reveal his presence to you, wherever you are. God is there. He will show up in unexpected times. He loves you and he wants you to know him – to walk with him each day.